

Clark's pioneers stopped above the falls

small, over all the years has been "tell us when, where and how much gas and electricity you will need, and it will be waiting for you."

The 125 years in which the history of the Louisville Gas and Electric Company overlaps that of Louisville have been significant—colorful, exciting years when the city was mushrooming from the last outpost on the western frontier into one of the nation's most important industrial, cultural and educational communities.

By providing the ever-increasing gas and power needs of its city, the Louisville Gas and Water Company, and later its offspring, the Louisville Gas and Electric Company, would play an important role in events which were to take place after its incorporation on that February a century and a quarter ago.

Actually, the tiny clearing in the wilderness along the frontier which would become Louisville had been made in the summer of 1778, some 60 years before the Louisville Gas and Water Company was founded.

That summer George Rogers Clark and 150 volunteer soldiers, with 20 families, had moved down the Ohio in flatboats and had landed on a small island above the falls, a series of rapids over which the stream dropped a distance of 30 feet in less than a quarter of a mile.

However, there had been white men at the falls long before that date.

Capt. Thomas Bullitt had surveyed land in the area in 1773; Daniel Boone had stood at the falls two years before that, and the dashing French explorer, Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de LaSalle, and his party, searching for what he thought was the Gulf of Mexico, had ported canoes around the rapids in 1669.

And, there is the tantalizing possibility that there were Welshmen at the falls more than 450 years earlier—three centuries before the time of Columbus, in fact.

Legend, based on some shreds of evidence, holds that Welshmen were at the falls prior to the year 1200, and atop a steep ridge on the Indiana shore of the river 14 miles upstream they erected a massive stone fort.

Ancient iron pick axes and utensils not of Indian or pioneer design have been found at or near the falls; early hunters supposedly discovered a crude gravestone on which the date 1186 had been scratched.

More impressive support of the Welsh legend is the fact that Clark believed it. So did Robert Durrett, a respected early Kentucky historian. In his notes, Clark related how the Indians had told him of a strange tribe that once lived near the falls. These people were fair of skin, wore armor to protect their bodies, and spoke a strange language, the Indians told Clark.

Durrett based his belief in the legend mainly on the finding near the falls in 1799 of six skeletons in armor.

"Each," he wrote, "had a breastplate of brass with the Welsh coat of arms."

But Welshmen 600 years before or not, it remained for Clark and his party of 1778 to establish the first permanent white settlement. Blockhouses were built on the island, corn was planted, and Clark began immediately to plan his campaign against the British Northwest Territory, a step necessary to make the Kentucky frontier safe against the English-inspired Indian raids.

Realizing that the island was not suited for anything more than a temporary stopping point, Clark had sent soldiers back to the settlement from his campaign in the winter of 1778-1779 to establish a more defensible fort on the mainland. This fort was built near the point where present 12th Street meets the river.

News of Clark's victories in the Northwest lured many settlers to the region the following summer. Three hundred arrived in the spring of 1780 alone, and in May the Legislature of Virginia passed an act "establishing the town of Louisville at the falls of the Ohio." The name was in honor of Louis XVI, King of France, for his aid in the Revolutionary War.

In 1781, Fort Nelson, located between present 7th and 8th Streets north of Main, was erected, and Louisville began to take root and grow.

With the westward expansion of the nation, the town at the falls assumed the character of a commercial trans-shipment point, and the portaging of cargoes around the rapids was the main activity. Flatboat shipments were unloaded, carted overland either above or below the falls and reloaded for the continued journey up or downstream.

It was not until 1825 that a company was organized to construct the canal around the falls. The project was completed in December of 1830, and within five years 1,500 steamers and 500 flatboats and keelboats, bearing 300,000 tons of cargo, were entering the canal annually.

Louisville was incorporated in 1828, and by the middle 1830's, its two hostelrys—the Galt House and the Louisville Hotel—were famed all across the frontier. By then the city's population was pushing the 20,000 mark, the figure it had attained by that exciting February in 1838 when this story begins with the incorporation of the Louisville Gas and Water Company.

The 125-year-long story which follows is divided into five segments of 25 years each for clarity in telling. To be told, in order, will be Louisville's gas light era from 1838 to 1863, the aftermath of the Civil War from 1863 to 1888, the coming of electric lights from 1888 to 1913, Louisville's great growth years from 1913 to 1938, and its industrial boom period, starting in 1938 and extending to 1963.

The story is exciting—and it is true.

This plaque at 7th and Main locates the spot on the mainland where soldiers started Fort Nelson.

